

A HISTORY OF WOOD ENGRAVING

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A HISTORY OF WOOD-ENGRAVING

Chapter 1



"The Engraver at Work"

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This Page is part of a series of pages giving a comprehensive history of wood-engraving, with some scanned images.

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WOOD-ENGRAVING:

ITS HISTORY AND PRACTICE

BY

WILLIAM ANDREW CHATTO

ORIGIN OF WOOD-ENGRAVING. OLD WOOD-CUTS AND BLOCK BOOKS IMPRESSED BY MEANS OF FRICTION.

Wood-engraving, as an art, has long been brought into general use throughout Europe as a mode of illustrating books, for which it has been adopted in consequence of the degree to which it unites beauty of effect with facility of production, when compared with engraving on copper and steel; it has also, although very recently, been made a yet more ready ally of the press, for the purpose of 'illustrating' the 'News' of the day, giving the 'very age and body of the time, its form and pressure;' an end which could only have been accomplished by an art capable of being used in conjunction with type and the steam engine, and yet processing in itself beauty enough to be ornamental and attractive.

Wood-engraving, in the perfection to which it has been brought by modern artists, has presented all these advantages, and that they have been used in a liberal and discriminating spirit, we trust that the pages of the 'Illustrated London News' have borne sufficient testimony.

Our endeavours having been crowned with the most signal success, we have imagined that it would be but a just tribute to the art that preceded and introduced printing, and which is now so powerful an assistant to its efforts, if we were to give to the public a sketch of the origin, progress, and modern practice of wood cutting, illustrated with cuts, showing the state of the art at different periods, its origin, its decline, its revival, and its present condition.

This sketch we have thrown into the form of a supplement, which we hope will not be deemed by our readers a gift unsuitable to the general plan of our journal, or unworthy to accompany it.

Wood-engraving, then, in the sense in which we propose to consider it, and as the term is generally understood, is the art of cutting figures on wood, for the purpose of their being impressed, in some colouring matter, upon paper.

It differs in principle, and in its mode of operation, from engraving on copper and steel, in the circumstance of the lines which form the impression being left prominent in the wood - the adjacent parts being cut away - while, in engraving on copper or steel, the lines are either cut into the plate by means of a graver, or bit into by means of a corrosive liquid, the adjacent surface remaining untouched. In wood-engraving the lights are cut out; in copperplate-engraving they are left.

The wood-engraver gets his black by leaving such portions of his block, as are to appear so in the impression untouched; while the copperplate-engraver, to obtain black, is obliged to make an incision in his plate.

From this difference between wood and copperplate-engraving in their mode of operation, arises the different manner of printing from a wood-block and from a copper-plate.

Wood blocks are printed in the same manner as letter-press; their prominent lines are covered with the ink by means of balls or rollers, and the impression is formed by the paper being pressed on to them; while in steel or copper-plates, the incised or hollowed lines are filled with ink, and the surface being wiped clean, and impression is obtained by pressing the paper into the inked lines, and operation which is performed by means of a rolling-press.

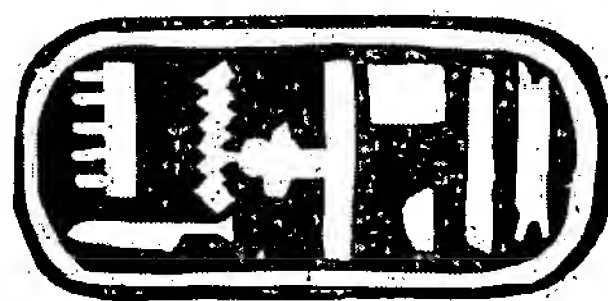
In an impression recently taken from a wood-block, the lines are slightly prominent at the back of the paper, in consequence of their being pressed upon it in front; while in an impression on a copper-plate, the lines are slightly indented at the back, in consequence of their having been pressed into the incisions of the plate in front.

The principal of engraving, both in relief or prominent lines, and in intaglio or incised lines, for the purpose of stamping impressions in soft or yielding substances, was known to the ancient Egyptians at a very early period, as is

proved by their rings and stamps, still existing.

The following cut is a reduced copy of an ancient Egyptian stamp, of wood, which was found Thebes, and brought to England by E. W. Land, Esq. It was probably used for stamping impressions on bricks when in a soft state.

The characters express the mane of an Egyptian King, 'Amonoph, beloved of truth,' who is supposed to have been a contemporary of Moses. The custom of stamping bricks in this manner was very general both with the Egyptians and ancient Babylonians.



Ancient Egyptian Brick-Stamp.

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The art of stamping money appears to have been known in Greece upwards of two thousand years before the art of printing books - which was derived from wood-engraving - was discovered and practiced in Germany.

There are, however, no sufficient grounds for believing that either the Egyptians, the Greeks, or the Romans applied their knowledge of engraving and stamping to the purpose of taking impressions on paper or similar substances, from wood blocks or plates of metal in the manner of modern wood and copperplate-engravings.

As the art of wood-engraving appears to have been practiced in China from an early period, it has been supposed that it was introduced into Europe by some of the travellers who visited that country towards the latter part of the thirteenth century; but this supposition is not corroborated by any evidence, and rests merely on the fact that wood-engraving appears to have been practiced in China before it was practiced in Europe. Marco Polo, a Venetian, who lived for several years in China about the period above alluded to, appears to have paid but little attention to the wood-engraving and block-printing of the Chinese, for in the account of his travels he does not even mention them.

It may here be remarked, that several other new applications of old well-known principals, suggested by man's natural reason and the wants of a progressing society, have in a similar manner been supposed to have been introduced from the East, as if Europeans could not, under similar circumstances, invent or combine as well as Asiatics.

In Charters of the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries, made by descendants of the Gothic race which has settled in Spain, some of the marks, or monograms, appear to have been impressed from a stamp; and there seems reason to believe that in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries Italian and German notaries used frequently to affix their official marks to instruments by means of a stamp.



Ancient Spanish Monograms.

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In a copy now lying before us of the proceedings of the Diet at Cologne, printed in 1513 - for the purpose of being sent to the several magistracies and local courts of justice throughout the German Empire, as modern acts of Parliament are sent to Clerks of the Peace - its authenticity is attested by the name of an official person, impressed at the end by means of a stamp.

There seems reason to conclude that wood-engraving was first applied to the representation of pictorial subjects, in the early part of the fifteenth century. One of its earliest known productions is a figure of St. Christopher, with the date 1423; and judging from the manner of its execution, it certainly cannot be considered a first attempt. It is, in fact, much superior both in design and engraving to many of the cuts of similar subjects executed upwards of half a century later.



St. Christopher, 1423.

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This cut was discovered pasted in the inside of the cover of an old manuscript volume of prayers, belonging to the Carthusian monastery of Buxheim, in the diocese of Augsburg, and was probably designed and engraved by a German artist of the district. It is coloured by means of a stencil, the manner in which old playing cards were coloured; and is a well established fact, that there were card-makers in Augsburg, in 1418.

For the information of such of our readers as may not know what a stencil is, we think it necessary to explain the meaning of the word, as it is not to be found in "Johnson's Dictionary:" a stencil is a piece of pasteboard, or a thin plate of metal, having figures or letters pierced through it, for the purpose of their being communicated to paper, parchment, linen, or any smooth flat surface, by means of a brush charged with colour, being passed over the stencil.

We give a reduced copy of this celebrated old cut (see above) which is now in the library of Earl Spencer, by whose father (the late earl) it was purchased, at a high price, for the purpose of enriching his magnificent collection of old wood-cuts, block and type-printed books, illustrative of the origin and progress of printing.

In the same library are two other old cuts, coloured in the same manner, and supposed to have been executed about the same period. One of them indeed - the Annunciation - was contained in the same volume as the St. Christopher, being pasted on the inside of the opposite cover.

The subject of the other is St. Bridget, of Sweden, writing at a desk, with a pilgrim's staff, hat and wallet, behind her - indicative of her pilgrimage to the Holy Land - and an inscription in German, above her head, the meaning of which is,

"O, Bridget, pray to God for us."

From the smoothness perceptible at the back of this cut, the impression has evidently been taken by means friction with a rubber or burnisher, which appears to have been the usual mode of taking impressions from wood-blocks previous to the invention of the press.

Though St. Christopher be a purely imaginary character, he was yet regarded as a real saint in former times by the ignorant and superstitious, who believed that no sudden nor violent death should befall them, and that they should not die without absolution, on the day on which they should see his image or picture. To this popular superstition, the two latin verses at the bottom of the cut relate:-

"Cristofori faciem die quacunque tueris,
Illa nempe die morte mala non morieris."

"On the day that thou seest St. Christopher's face,
By no ill death shalt thou end thy race."

Molanus, a Catholic professor of Theology, at Lovain, condemns this superstition, in his "Treatise on Sacred Images and their abuse," published at Douay, in 1617. He says, the figure of St. Christopher used to be painted in halls and churches where it might be easily seen; and that he has heard of it being painted in many places in Germany, outside of the church, either at the entrance, or on the wall, the reason of its being so placed being explained by two verses, which he quotes, and which are the same as those under the old cut.

The figure of St. Christopher was also supposed to have the power of preserving the house in which it was placed from all harm. It may not be out of place to remark here, that, in comparatively recent times, small wood-cuts of the

"three Kings of Cologne" used to be sold as a security to travellers and other persons, against the perils of the road, head-ache, falling-sickness, fevers, sorcery, all kinds of witchcraft, and sudden death.

Under each cut a few lines were printed, enumerating its virtues, and warranting that it had touched the heads of the Three Kings of Cologne - Caspar, Mechior, and Balthasar - who, according to "tradition," are the three Eastern Magi who offered gifts to the infant Jesus, at Bethlehem. One of those preservative billets was found in the pocket of a man named William Jackson, who was convicted, with six other smugglers, and hung at Chichester, in 1749, for the murder of two custom-house officers, named Chater and Galley.

The following account of St. Christopher, from the Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine, will sufficiently explain the cut.

St. Christopher, who was a person of gigantic stature,
betook himself, at the suggestion of a certain holy hermit,
to the pious work of carrying pilgrims across a river.

On one occasion he took up, as he supposed, a little boy,
but who grew so heavy, that the Herculean saint,
notwithstanding the support of a palm tree which he used as a staff,
found great difficulty in reaching the opposite bank.
Having landed, however, he thus addressed the passenger:

"Boy, you placed me in great danger;
for you weighed so heavy that if I had had the whole world on my back,
I could scarcely have felt a greater weight."

The answer which he received,
informed him of the real character of the person whom he had mistaken for a mere mortal child:

"Wonder not, Christopher,
for nor only have you had the whole world upon your shoulders,
but also him who created the world."

It is very likely that the first professional wood-engravers were card-makers; and this is rendered more probable by the fact that wood-engravers were generally called card-painters - Briefmalers - in Germany, about the middle of the fifteenth century.

They were also called Formschneiders - figure-cutters - in Germany, about the same period; and subsequently this term appears to have been more specifically applied to those who were chiefly employed in executing wood-cuts for the illustration of books, to distinguish them from those whose principal business was the engraving and colouring of cards.

Till towards the year 1500, however, the terms Briefmaler and Formschneider appear to have been frequently used as synonymous. It may here be observed that the word Form, in the compound term Form-Schneider, signifies the original form, model, pattern or type, from which anything is made, and this suggests the idea of an engraved block, from which numerous impressions could be taken.

The word form is still used in a printing-office, to signify a quantity of types regularly arranged, and locked, or wedged up, within the quoins, ready to have impressions taken from them.



Old Playing-Card, 15th Century.

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From an anecdote related of St. Bernardin of Sienna, a famous preacher, who died in 1444, and was canonized in 1450, it appears that the manufacture of playing cards was a regular business at Bologna, in 1423.

When preaching there, in that year, against the vice of gaming, he inveighed so forcibly against the game of cards, in particular, to which the Bolognese were much addicted, that his hearers made a fire in the public place where he was preaching, and threw their cards into it.

A card-maker, who was present, and who had heard the denunciations of the saint, not only against those who supplied them with cards, this addressed him, in affliction of mind:

"I have not learned, father, any other art but that of painting cards; and if you deprive me of that, you deprive me of life, and my destitute family of the honest means of gaining a living."

To this appeal the saint cheerfully replied:

"If you do not know what else to paint, paint this figure, and you will never have cause to regret having done so."

This saying, he took a tablet, and drew in it a sun with its resplendent rays, having in the midst the name of Jesus, denoted by the sign I.H.S. The man followed the Saint's advice; and so numerous were the purchasers of the new work of art, that he soon became rich.

The following figure, copied from an old wood-cut, with the date 1454, preserved in the Royal Library at Paris, represents St. Bernardin displaying the same sacred symbol which he recommended to the card-painter of Bologna.

It has been supposed that it was engraved with reference to the anecdote above related; but on this point our readers must decide for themselves. The original cut, which is coloured, is surrounded by a border, and contains four Latin verses, which it has been considered unnecessary to copy.

It is executed in a curious manner: the engraver, wishing to express more than mere outline, has reduced the black, by cutting out a number of small circular spots, which give the cut the appearance of having been printed from a block that had been "honey-combed" by worms. Old wood-cuts executed in this manner are of rare occurrence.



St. Bernardin, 1454.

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In the year 1441 the company or fellowship of painters at Venice obtained an order from the magistracy, prohibiting the introduction of foreign manufactured cards, and stamped or printed coloured figures, under the penalty of a fine of xxx liv. xii soldi, and the forfeiture of the articles.

This order appears to have been made on the petition of the company of painters, representing that " the art and mystery of making cards and stamped figures, which were practiced in Venice, had fallen into total decay, in consequence of the great quantities of foreign playing-cards and stamped coloured figures, which were brought into the city."

As the word stamped - stampide - appears to refer to impressions from a wood-block, it seems likely that the stamped coloured figures were wood-engravings of saints of the same kind as "St. Christopher," the "Virgin," and "St. Bridget," and coloured in a similar manner, by means of a stencil.

It is highly probable that the Prenters of Antwerp - who appear to have been associated in a company or fellowship with the Painters, Statuaries, Stone-cutters, Glass-makers, and Illuminators of books, in 1442 - were wood-engravers and printers of coloured figures. It is certain that they were not printers in the modern sense of the word; for though Gutemberg had already made some experiments in typography, at Strasburg, the art was not then known at Antwerp, nor indeed so far perfected as to be practically available, for the purpose of book-printing, in any other place.

When typography was subsequently introduced into Holland, from Germany, its professors were not called Prenters, but Boek-drukkers, that is, Book-pressmen.

Although the earliest professional card-makers might generally impress the outlines of figures from engraved wood blocks, it is certain that they also were accustomed to form the outlines by means of a stencil.

The old cards in the print-room of the British Museum, which are probably the oldest, of their kind, in existence, and of a date not later than 1440, are executed in this manner.

They were discovered in the back of an old book, forming what are called "boards," and were purchased for the Museum by Mr. Josi, the keeper of the prints, of Messrs. Paul and Dominic Colnaghi. The following cut of the knave of hearts, is a faithful copy of one of those old stencilled cards.

From the execution of such cuts as the St. Christopher, containing, besides the figures, only a line or two of explanatory engraved text, the next important application of the art of wood-engraving was the execution of what are now generally called block books, that is, books consisting of pictorial subjects and explanatory text impressed entirely from engraved wood-blocks.

Small grammatical primers, such as the "Donatus," and the "Grammaticale Alexandri Galli," were also entirely engraved on wood; but though fragments of such schoolbooks are to be found in several great libraries, both in England and on the continent, it is believed that no complete copy has come down to our times.

The three principal block-books, properly so called, and most frequently referred to by writers on bibliography, are -

1. The "Apocalypsis, seu Historia Sancti Johannis;"
2. The "Historia Virginis ex Cantico Canticorum;" and
3. the book generally called "Biblia Pauperum."

The first, of which there are six editions known, is a history of the principal events in the life of St. John, partly derived from tradition, together with subjects from the Revelations; the second, of which there are two editions, is an allegorical history of the Virgin, as supposed to have been prefigured in Solomon's song; and the third consists of a comparison of certain types, or prefigurations of "The Old Testament," with their supposed anti-types, or accomplishments, in "The New Testament." Of this work there are five editions known with the text in Latin; and two, more recent, of the date 1470 and 1475, with the text in German. There are also two editions of it, one Latin and the other German, with the text printed from moveable types, by Albert Pfister, at Bamberg, about 1462.



From Pfister's Biblia Pauperum, 1462.

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In all those works the cuts, with explanatory text, are impressed on one side of the paper only; and where opportunity for examination has been afforded, it has generally been observed that the impressions have been taken by means of friction.

The ink is a kind of distemper, which yields to water, usually of a sepia or umber colour. In order that the cuts and text might follow each other like pages in a book, without any intervening blanks, the blank sides were pasted together.

In what year or in what country those books were first executed, has been much debated among bibliographers; and the suppositions and assertions that have been put forth on the subject, are, in proportion to the evidence adduced, as a gallon of sack is to a halfpenny-worth of bread.

From all that has been advanced, the least objectionable conclusion seems to be that the earliest editions were executed some time between 1430 and 1450; that the first editions of the "Historia Sancti Johannis," and the "Biblia Pauperum," were the work of German artists; and that the second edition of the "Historia Virginis" - wherever the first may have appeared - was executed either in Holland or in Flanders.

Of the cuts which appear in those block-books, it may be observed that they are generally superior in design to most of the cuts which appear in books printed from moveable types previous to 1490.

Though the figures often display incorrect drawing, yet their action is sometimes very well expressed; and the drapery is generally "well cast," more especially in the female figures in the history of the Virgin. Shade is usually indicated by a series of short parallel lines, but no lines crossing each other at oblique angles, and forming what is now called "cross-hatching" are introduced.

It has been said that cross-hatchings were first introduced in the cuts to the Nuremburg Chronicle, published in 1493; but the assertion is not correct, for cross-hatchings are to be perceived in the frontispiece to "Breydenbach's Travels," a work printed in Mentz in 1486.

In the "Introduction to the Critical Study of the Scriptures, by the Rev. T. H. Horne, B.D." - a work of much greater repute than authority, not only as regards art, but also on questions of theology and sacred criticism - the following most erroneous statement respecting the so-called Biblia Pauperum appears:-

"It is a manual or kind of catechism of the Bible for the use of young persons and the common people, whence it derives its name of Biblia Pauperum, 'the bible of the poor,' who were thus enabled to acquire, at a comparatively low price, an imperfect knowledge of some of the events recorded in Scripture."

This account proves that the writer neither knew the meaning of the title "Biblia Pauperum," as applied to the work in question, nor was acquainted with the state of the common people in the fifteenth century, both as regards their means of purchasing and capability of reading, such a book.

The title "Biblia Pauperum," as given to this book, did not mean the "Bible of the Poor" in general, but signified the Bible of the poor Preachers, that is, poor preaching mendicant friars, but more especially those of the Franciscan order, as might be proved by many instances of the restricted meaning of the word "Pauperum" in the titles of books not only of that period, but of both earlier and subsequent times; one instance, however, need only be cited: St. Bonaventura, who lived in the thirteenth century, wrote a work intended for the use of his own order, the Franciscan, which is entitled "Biblia Pauperum."

The work under consideration was never intended for the laity of any class, and it is most certainly never was a book which could be acquired by the poor at a comparatively low price; and even if it could, they would have been unable to read it, seeing that the text is in cramped abbreviated Latin, unless, indeed, it be presumed that they were more learned than the clergy of the period.

Among the several other early block-books, an alphabet, formerly belonging to Sir George Beaumont, who bequeathed it to the British Museum and a work entitled "Exercitium Super Paster-noster," formerly belonging to the Cathedral Church of Tournay, but now in the public library at Mons, seem most deserving of notice here; each copy of those books is unique in its kind; and the cuts of both may be ranked with the best of the period to which they belong, both with regard to design and execution.

Sir George Beaumont's Alphabet is about the size of a modern duodecimo; there is only one cut on each leaf, and from the smooth appearance of the blank sides, which are not pasted together, as in most block-books, it is evident that the impressions have been taken by means of friction, and not by a press.

Most of the letters are composed wholly of human figures, though in a few, animals are introduced, both for the sake of variety, and to complete the form of the letter. They are impressed in a sepia-coloured ink; the greater part of the letter A is torn out; and the letters S, T and V, are wanting.

At the end of the volume is a beautifully designed ornament, consisting of flowers and foliage. The late Mr. W. Y. Ottley, in a manuscript catalogue, in the Print Room of the British Museum, thus describes the volume, and gives his opinion of its date, and of the country of the artist:- "Alphabet of initial letters composed of grotesque figures, wood engravings of the middle of the fifteenth century apparently the work of a Dutch or Flemish artist."

With respect to the date, we are of Mr. Ottley's opinion; but do not agree with him about the appearance of their being the work of a Dutch or Flemish artist. Mr. Ottley was too fond of ascribing, without sufficient evidence, such old wood-cuts to Dutch and Flemish artists, to the prejudice of the Germans, as he could not, without glaring injustice, assign to his favourite Italians.



Letter K. Alphabet of initial letters, 15th century.

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From a brief inscription in French on one of the cuts, the letter K, of which we give a fac-simile (see scanned image above), as a specimen of the work, and from the general character of the whole it is more likely that they were designed either in France or in England by a native artist, than in Germany or Holland; from some writing at the beginning of the volume, there can be no doubt of its having belonged to an Englishman so early as the reign of Henry VIII.

The words of the brief inscription alluded to are, "monavez," with a heart - which is to be read as rebus for the word coeur - between them; and the figure kneeling and pointing to the label is thus supposed to address his mistress, to whom he is at the same time offering a ring, "Mon coeur avez," - Thou hast my heart. On the principal of "suum cuique," we cheerfully acknowledge that we owe this amended reading to an article on wood-engraving in the "Gentleman's Magazine," for August, 1839, although, the writer of it appears to have paid no regard to the principal himself, but to have most unceremoniously given to John Nokes what belonged to Richard Styles; such conduct was not gentlemanly anywhere; and least of all in the "Gentleman's Magazine."

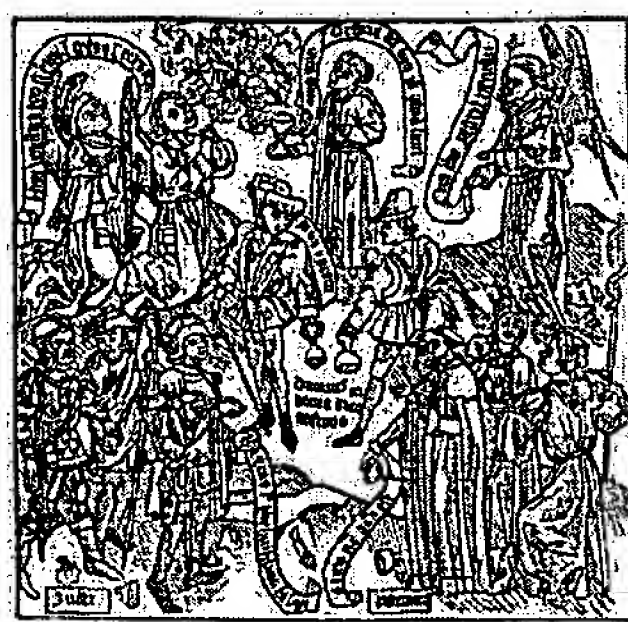
The "Exercitium super Pater-noster," or Exercise on the Lord's Prayer, is, as we have already observed, unique; and only writers who have noticed it, so far as we know, are Santander, who, in the second volume of his "Dictionnaire Bibliographique," gives a brief general account of the book, with a detailed explanation of the several cuts; and the

Rev. T. H. Horne, who borrowed his information from Santander. It is of folio size, and the substance of Santander's general account of it is as follows:-

"A Precious monument of the art of wood-engraving,
and the more interesting as no bibliographer has mentioned it;
it has even escaped the researches of Heineken,
who has given a most curious and detailed account of all the block-books which
he had been able to discover in the richest literary depositories of Europe.

This little work, which bears the marks of the highest antiquity, consists of ten wood-cuts, printed on only one side of the paper, with the text, or short explanation, at the top of each." Santander, however, has omitted to mention - for what reason we shall not venture to suppose - that, besides the explanation, in Latin, at the top of each cut, there is also an explanation in Flemish, at the bottom.

Referring to such of our readers as may wish to read a detailed explanation of the rest of the cuts, to Santander's "Dictionaire," tom. ii., p.402, we shall content ourselves with giving a fac-simile and explanation of the fifth cut, which relates to the passage, "Fiat voluntas tua sicut in Cœlo, et in terra"- "Thy will be done in earth, as it is in Heaven." (see image below)



Exercitium Super Pater-Noster.

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At the top of the cut, on the left, are seen the friar, who is to be instructed in prayer, and his angelic instructor, on their knees before the Almighty.

To the right is an angel, with a label in his hand, containing the inscription, "Qui stat videat ne cadat" - "Let him who stands take heed that he does not fall;" and in the centre is a figure with the inscription, "Bonus Christianus: Gratia Dei sum id quod sum" - "The good Christian: by God's grace I am what I am."

To this character the warning, "Let him who stands take heed, &c., is more particularly addressed, as his confidence in divine grace may easily slide into too high an opinion of his own merits.

Towards the bottom of the cut, to the left, are three figures representing the Jews - "Judœi"- with the inscription, "Quis est Jesus filius fabri?" - "Who is Jesus, the carpenter's son?"

To the right are three other figures representing the Pagans - "Pagani" - who are saying, "Quis vr. dns. est.?" - "But who is the Lord?"

In the centre are two figures, representing those bad people who merely profess to be Christians, "Mali Christiani" - with the inscription, "Ducamus in bonis dies nostros" - "Let us live among the good." Such nominal Christians, though living among the good, yet are not of them.

CHAPTER TWO:

OF THE INVENTION OF TYPOGRAPHY, OR THE ART OF MOVEABLE LETTERS, AND THE INVENTION OF THE PRINTING-PRESS.

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